

Homewood Friends Meeting ad hoc committee on the 2012 draft F&P revision (Dec., 2012 – Feb., 2013)

Partial notes from discussions on the draft's Sections I and II.

1. The “Life in the Spirit” section (I-2) appears to redefine Quakerism, in an ultimately individualistic way, as a collectivity of perpetual “Seekers,” each with his or her own “Truth” and traveling his or her unique “path,” whose principal tasks are to come together and to speak and listen to each other's “Truth” “in that which is eternal” – a phrase that is not explained or defined. That definition of Quakerism differs from our traditional self-understanding as a community of people who have found “the way, the truth, and the life” in the “convicting,” leading, and empowering activity of the light within – specifically, the spirit that was in Jesus – and whose principal task, severally and corporately, is to discern those leadings and to live in fidelity to them. Some members of our group feel that they would not have become Quakers had our faith and practice been defined at the time in the manner of this draft F&P.

We note that a more traditional self-understanding is provided on pp. iv-v, in the prefatory material, and appears occasionally in other parts of the draft. We suggest that it should be at the core of the material in Section 2, “The Life of the Spirit.”

That section, by the way, does not define what it means by “Spirit” or “Light,” crucial terms that -- along with others such as Truth, Spirit, and Seed -- are not defined in the glossary, either.

2. Section I-2 in particular has the character of an invitation to a person who is not yet familiar with Quakerism, yet it precedes explanation of such crucial things as Quaker worship even as it makes reference to them. It could lead a new reader, for example, to view vocal ministry as simple sharing of one's thoughts or feelings. The brief discussion of worship here is redundant – Section 3 is devoted to worship – and possibly misleading because incomplete. The book should have a more logically progressive and even strategic structure, leading the reader by the hand from introductory material to more substance without requiring any previous knowledge of Quakerism.

3. There are inconsistencies or contradictions within the larger section I. For example, the final paragraph on page 20 begins with “The passion of Friends is not in limiting or directing Seekers to a particular Truth” but goes on to say, “We are not each alone in a world of our own Truth but united in the common light of the same Spirit.” Later, on page 24, it is stated that “While this is a very individualistic search, we recognize that each of us, gathered in this Meeting, is engaged in a similar quest, safe in a trusted environment where Friends all around us are similarly worshiping.” How those assertions cohere, or even if they do, is not explained.

Note: we question the use of the word “passion,” which appears multiple times in this section, as well as the inappropriate capitalization – e.g., “Seekers” refers to a specific historical phenomenon that was not identical with Quakerism and should not be confused with it. There are a number of such concerns about the draft, but at this point we want to focus on more general issues.

4. Quotations are sometimes incorrect. This includes the misquotation from George Fox on the back cover of the book, along with a misquoted passage from John Woolman on p. 105 and elsewhere. However, the same passages are elsewhere quoted accurately.

Quotations are also taken out of context and, apparently, misapplied. In most cases of inappropriate usage, the draft appears to follow what has become something of a trend among liberal Friends; however, the preparation of a new Faith and Practice book offers us an opportunity to return to a more faithful use of our ancestors' words.

For example, on page 19 it is said that George Fox “illuminates the *core* of Quakerism” (emphasis added) with these words: “And Friends meet together, and know one another in that which is eternal, which was before the world was.” In his epistles (the passage is from #149), Fox often urges Friends to meet together in the spirit of love; however, he does not assert that those exhortations set forth the “core” of Quakerism or “*the* spiritual tasks of Quakers” (again, emphasis added). Such an assertion, as we find in the draft, represents a departure from our traditional understanding that the core of Quakerism is our individual and corporate submission to the judging, inspiring, and empowering work in our hearts of that spirit which was in Jesus.

On page 5, Fox's famous “then you will come to walk cheerfully” passage is quoted (correctly, unlike on the back cover), but again the context is omitted. It is preceded by the part of the passage itself that includes “walk cheerfully,” which out of context seems to exhort us to a happy disposition, and it precedes the assertion that “No clergyman ... was required to experience the Divine Presence.” Fox's original epistle appears to have neither of those concepts in mind. It begins with this:

In the power of life and wisdom, and [in the] dread of the Lord God of life ... dwell; that in the wisdom of God over all ye may be preserved, and be a terror to all the adversaries of God, and a dread, answering that of God in them all, spreading the truth abroad, awakening the witness, confounding the deceit, gathering up out of transgression into the life.... Spare no deceit. Lay the sword upon it; go over it.

The epistle does not urge Friends to be pleasant to others, nor does it address a doctrine of experiencing “the Divine Presence”: it was written “to Friends in the ministry” and contains instructions for Quaker missionaries on confronting and challenging unbelievers (namely, most people they met). A more appropriate passage for the idea that intermediaries are not necessary (and in fact evil, according to early Quakers) might be Fox's famous “There is one...” passage. However, that passage has already, on page 3, been separated from its context and provided with an ellipsis that replaces the proximate referent of “And this I knew experimentally,” potentially leading to further misreading of Fox.

On page 23, a section of the same passage, the part which includes “be patterns, be examples,” is said to be a call to “set a pattern of deep listening”: we don't see that in Fox's statement.

A much longer quotation, on page 21, is from Isaac Pennington. It begins with “And oh, how sweet and pleasant it is....” The passage is implicitly applied in the draft F&P to Quakers; Pennington wrote it, however, as part of a defense of Quakers called “An Examination of the Grounds or Causes which are said to induce the Court of Boston in New England to make that order or law of banishment, upon pain of death, against the Quakers....” Friends were banned from Boston, and some martyred there, not because they each believed and practiced in his or her unique, individual manner, but because of their shared and consistent Quaker faith and practice, at the core of which was, again, discernment of and fidelity to the convicting, guiding, and empowering work of the Christ-light within. We hope that an emphasis on that discernment and fidelity can replace both the individualism and the emphasis on the telling of and listening to personal stories that we find in the draft F&P.

Other concerns include the occasional use of quotation marks around unattributed material (*e.g.*, p. 22, line 3) and the use of quotations from non-Quaker thinkers such as Rilke (p. 21), particularly in a section devoted specifically to explicating Quaker faith, where the erroneous impression may be given that those authors were Quakers.

5. The last bullet point on page 2 recognizes that “Quakers knew that there was one Voice that mattered, one Light, and one Seed, and that not everything people thought they heard came from that source.” We are grateful for that statement, and, with the understanding that “Voice,” “Light,” and “Seed” all refer to the spirit that we see in Jesus, we hope that the perspective it represents might suffuse the whole of our book of Faith and Practice.

6. On page 22, being a Quaker is described as entailing three things: the individual following of “a spiritual path grounded in love”; speaking about one's path to the community; and listening to others' similar speaking. Again, this strikes us as individualistic and relativistic, and it seems to reduce Quaker community to a venue for sharing about diverse personal experiences.

7. Page 24, top, seems again to stress individualism and reduce community. It also asserts that sometimes Friends are “unable to refuse the demand to speak”: that concerns us because it implies that there are times when discernment is not needed, as if strong feeling is evidence that something is an inspired and appropriate message. We see giving vocal ministry not as relieving oneself of a burden or surcharge of emotion, nor even as simply sharing one’s spiritual journey or expressing one’s “call” to ministry, but as offering a gift to the gathered members of our community: ministry is service to and for the other.

We continue to be concerned about the teaching that “Genuine ministry is often preceded by ... heart-pounding weakness” (p. 124). Anxiety about public speaking should not be confused with a sign of inspiration, and it is even possible that anxiety is an indication that there is too much of self in the situation. We hope for more helpful guidance on the important topic of discernment in ministry.

8. The section on worship-sharing (pp. 24-25) does not carefully distinguish worship-sharing from traditional Quaker worship, and, by its length and placement, appears to equate the two in importance. Coupled with the chapter’s emphasis on sharing of personal “journeys” and definition of community as a place for speaking and listening, that may create misunderstanding and negatively affect Friends’ conduct of worship in the future.

9. Friends had a number of concerns with statements on page 43.

a. The assertion that “we are called to testify, not called to fix the world” seems to say that we envision our vocation as telling others how to live while taking no action to address the world's suffering. Many of us found that statement disturbing.

b. We wonder about the statement (with, it was noted, abundant capitalization) that “God is the Clerk of the Outcomes Committee”: what is the intent of the assertion, and does it not imply a definition of the clerk's function that is at odds with our understanding of clerk as facilitator? It was also noted that the sentence employs jargon that may be unintelligible for newcomers.

c. The criterion for action, that it leaves us feeling “easy in spirit,” feels inadequate and self-centered to us. Considerations of relationship appear to be absent. The criterion seems far from Penn's “Let us then try what Love will do: For if Men did once see we Love them, we should soon find they would not harm us.”

10. The emphasis on “testimonies” as ideals or standards, the reduction of Quaker moral life to the observance of such standards instead of a dynamic response to the continuous leading of the spirit that was in Jesus, and the use of the acronym SPICES, a 20th-century innovation which seems to further externalize (and even trivialize, at least one Friend felt) the source of our moral life, were noted with concern. It was also noted that the listing of six specific categories restricts the range of possible expressions of the spirit.

11. Further discussion on the idea of testimonies included concerns that we are reflecting the world rather than reflecting truth to the world through our behavior, and that the idea of testimonies as standards can lead to hypocritical judgment of others.

12. The sections on peace – testimony, queries, and advices – do not address concerns such as conscientious objection, civil disobedience, alternatives to violence and war, etc., issues that are treated in, for example, Philadelphia YM's F&P.

13. The queries and advices on simplicity appear to be oriented to making us more content. Challenging issues of ethics are absent, and, while we are encouraged to “reflect my most deeply held values,” the “convicting” function of the Light that would lead us to question those values is not mentioned. As with the other “testimonies,” simplicity becomes here not so much a response to the movement of love in the heart as a standard to be lived up to, more or less, as Friends feel easy.